DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 789 CS 204 323

AUTHOR Meade, Richard A.
TITLE The Language Curriculum: Past, Present, and Future.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the combined Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education and the Secondary School English Conference (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, March 15-18, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; *Educational History; Educational Practice; Elementary Secondary Education; English Curriculum; *English Instruction; *Grammar; *Language Instruction; Linguistics; *Traditional Grammar

ABSTRACT

In tracing the development of language curriculum in public schools, one discovers that prior to the twentieth century grammar was the center of linguistic attention. Around the beginning of the century, psychologists and others were doing research on the supposed efficacious results of such study and were finding that such supposed results were greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, the great majority of English teachers continued to argue that formal grammar study should remain in the curriculum. In actual practice, however, teachers began teaching only that grammar considered to be functional, although little agreement existed as to what that was. The functional movement sought to reveal the usefulness of grammar and emphasized drill work to eliminate errors. Through the 1930s it was assumed that all pupils should receive instruction in grammar. Since then, research has shown that pupils of lower ability and perhaps even of average ability may not be able to learn grammar. In spite of this, many schools continue to ignore research results and to teach formal grammar to all students. Since the 1930s, language teaching has slowly taken into account the concepts of varieties of usages, appropriateness as opposed to correctness, and dialect differences. More frequently, matters such as language change, dialects, and language play are replacing more formal studies of grammar. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED173789

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM:
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Richard A. Meade

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

By

Richard A. Meade

Professor of English Education
University of Virginia

Before this century language in the schools revolved around the continuous study of grammar (predicate nominatives, dependent clauses, and the like) without anyone questioning its value. Grammar had been the center of linguistic attention for centuries: it was a member of the classical trivium and its early importance in this country is shown in the names of early schools: the Latin Grammar School and the English Grammar School. From this use of the word grammar, in many localities elementary schools are still "grammar schools".

Time honored traditional existence was not the only reason for the revered position of grammar in the curriculum in the first quarter of this century. Reasons "set forth in the past" for the study of grammar appeared in Instruction in English, a monograph of the National Survey of Secondary Education conducted by the United States Office of Education in 1932, as follows: " (1) for purposes of mental discipline, (2) as an aid to literary interpretation, (3) as preparation for the study of foreign languages, (4) for knowledge of a

CS204923

desirable terminology, and (5) as an aid to correctness in speech and writing." [1]

According to the mental discipline theory of educational psychology and its essential corollary of "transfer of training" as an effect of this discipline, it was educationally sound to supply all students with a liberal dosage of formal grammar content. The more difficult the study, the better agency of mental discipline it was. Such study was even practical in a sense and was held to be widely applicable, for a mind sufficiently so disciplined could then attack a variety of challenging endeavors. Thus learning transfer would accrue. It was this same philosophy that lead the Committee of Ten, 1894, to recommend that all students in high school be taught exactly the same thing in exactly the same way. Each mind should receive the same discipline.

About this time, however, psychologists were exploding the mental discipline theory and held that transfer of training did not come about by mental discipline, if, indeed, there was such a thing. Thus the psychological basis for the prescription of formal grammar for all students was swept away. Others sought to erase any more practical basis for formal grammar instruction. The first attempt came as a research investigation in 1917 by Julius Boraas, who, "working with State examinations in Minnesota, found a closer

relationship between results in grammar and arithmetic, grammar and geography, and grammar and history than between those in grammar and composition." [2] Asker (1923) reached a similar conclusion regarding lack of relationship between proficiency in grammar and ability in composition. [3]

In the 1932 survey bulletin the author, Dora V. Smith, concluded that at that time the "burden of proof (rested) with those who believe(d) that a knowledge of grammar functions in speech and writing." [4] Up to that time, she said, there was no evidence available in print to support the contention that a knowledge of technical grammar does so function. Virtually the same statement reflects the situation today.

However, the vast majority of teachers of English either have not believed the findings of research or have not become acquainted with these findings, because they have continued to contend passionately that formal grammar study should remain in the English curriculum for all students and that it would supply the magical potion needed to cause students to write and talk correctly and effectively. Nevertheless, thoughout the years of this century there have been numerous studies to support the conclusion as to the lack of value of grammar learning as an aid to effective language expression. Summaries by Ingrid Strom, 1961, and Stephen Sherwin, 1969 , have made this information readily available to teachers and supervisors

as has the "Research Roundup" section in the December, 1977, English Journal. This feature cited the two newest studies on the relationship of grammar study and effective writing.[5] One by Harris (1962) and another by Elley, et al.,(1976) are examples of the "best kind of thoroughly designed educational research". Both reached the same conclusion: No empirical evidence exists for teaching grammar for any purpose. The Elley study included transformational grammar which, of course, the 1962 one did not do. In recent years the language curriculum of some schools has contained the study of transformational grammar as a replacement for the traditional Latinate grammar, since there is a general concensus that this new grammar is indeed a grammar of English and not of Latin as was traditional grammar.

From the very first questioning of grammar in the curriculum many English teachers have opposed any reduction in attention to grammar. Following Boraas's early study, the functional grammar movement began. Courses of study of the late twenties often stated that their grammar content included "that amount of grammar which is functional" in speech and writing. There was not agreement as to what amount of grammar was functional, for in a selected number of courses the topics ranged from 45 to 149, according to Smith's survey.[6] Yet there was a real effort to discover which parts of grammar

were useful in the improvement of expression. Apparently, teachers felt that they would concede enough to omit the parts of grammar found to be non-functional. This idea was the subject of research. Rivlin presented a list of grammar items to a panel of English experts and asked them to evaluate these on a five-point scale to indicate to what extent an item was functional. An item of grammar was functional if it possessed a "function" in the sense that Rivlin defined the term: "Function, as used in this connection, may be defined as that application of the knowledge of a grammatical item which will prevent the commission of an error in English or which will assist in the correction of an error already made." [7]

For example the distinction between the nominative and objective cases would be functional for pronouns but not for nouns. Another way used to discover the functional parts of grammar was the "error study", the tabulating by frequency of errors in pupils papers. There were many of these, including a mammoth project by O'Rourke sponored by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1932. There was an allied emphasis in schools on drill on items of error. O'Rourke's study tested pupils to ascertain the degree of success of the earnest attempt to eliminate errors in the use of English. He concluded that the emphasis on the elimination of errors was "bearing fruit" as shown by the

results of his testing. He felt, however, that the results left "much to be desired" since, for example,"well instead of good" shows 71 per cent mastery in the third grade and 75 percent in the twelfth." [8]

The functional grammar movement sought to reveal the usefulness of grammar, saw this usefulness as meaning the eradication of errors in expression, and emphasized drill on specific items as an all-important function of English in the schools. At first this drill applied to all usages considered incorrect by traditional criteria without regard for (1) dialect differences, (2) functional varieties of usage, or (3) language change.

During the time when no one questioned the teaching of formal grammar and during the period of the functional grammar movement, it was assumed that all pupils, regardless of their abilities, interests, and needs, should receive instruction in grammar. During the first wave of ability grouping in secondary schools, which took place during the 1920's and 1930's,formal grammar content formed a major part of the English curriculum for all three tracks. The major difference for the lowest ability group was simply that the study of grammar took more time. They had less time, therefore, for other phases of English.

Since then the question has been raised as to whether lower ability pupils, or even those of average ability,

possess the intelligence necessary to learn grammar. Rachel Salisbury pointed out in 1936 that it takes "the same level of mental maturity" to learn formal grammar as is required for "the study of calculus".[9] In 1961 I reported in an English Journal article ("Who Can Learn Grammar?") on tests administered to seniors in a Virginia high school. The half of these seniors with intelligence quotients below 104 had only four percent who were able to answer correctly seventy-five percent of the items on a grammar test. At the thoretical level, however, not many educators seem to be interested in this point of lack of ability to learn grammar because at this level it has been widely accepted that the study of formal grammar is useless anyway except on an elective basis.

When we consider language study in the past and in the present, we must consider the vast discrepancy between theory and practice. Many schools today reject the findings of research and modern psychological theories and continue to teach formal grammar, even for all students. The present back-to-the-basics movement reinforces the continuation of traditional practices, for to go "back" in language study means to many a single practice: the return to the formal study of Latinate grammar. Some school systems in the wake of this movement are adopting older textbooks that provide in full traditional grammar content at every grade level.

It has already been pointed out that a part of the functional grammar movement which began in the late twenties was drill on items of usage and that these items were often determined by frequency counts of errors in pupils' papers. At that time usage errors were in accord with the form of the language generally referred to as standard English. The schools recognized only one form of the language, that dictated by the traditional rules of Latinate grammar. In the early thirties--about the same time--came the first recognition of the difference between formal and informal varieties of standard English and of the phenomenon of language change which made acceptable certain so-called errors of the past. A landmark study was Current English Usage, by Sterling A. Leonard,(1935) under the auspices of the National Council of Teachers of English. This was followed in 1946 by Teaching English Usage, by Robert C. Pooley, also a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, which described five levels of language usage. In the 1968 revision of this work Pooley replaced the term levels by varieties, since the former term implied that one language form was more acceptable than another without regards to the situation of its use.

Gradually -- very slowly -- the theory of language teaching took into account the concept of varieties of usage,

the doctrine of appropriateness as opposed to correctness. Classroom practice has, as usual, followed slowly.

As already implied accompanying the idea of appropriateness of usage came the realization that the language has changed, that many usages once considered incorrect have in this century become correct. It isn't even a matter of appropriateness for usages of this type; the change has simply been effected. Who says anymore "With whom are you going to the basketball game?" We all say, "Who are you going with?" Of course, this particular sentence rarely occurs in writing. Yet a sentence like the following does: The reason we all want to elect Jerry Sloan to a seat on the city council is because he knows first hand the problems of public education. Is because? So the realization of the present status of certain usages has taken away the emphasis of the functional grammar enthusiasts on practice on these usages as incorrect.

Today's curriculum embraces, too, a special phase of usage: dialectology. High school pupils must now realize what dialects are, what kinds of differences exist between them, and most importantly, the place of dialects in the natural use of language. They -- and teachers -- must know that a dialect is a person's own language that must not be

attacked as a wrong language. The business of determining how best to have a speaker learn a second dialect, if he needs to do so, and the problem of the decision to do so remain unsolved.

Accompanying the current attention to usage and dialects is another replacement for formal grammar study, the use of sentence combining practice as a means of having student writing become more mature. Practice seems to be bearing out the findings of Frank O'Hare's research in sentence combining, which not only showed its value but also proved that this activity could be successful without the formal study of transformational grammar.[10] Nevertheless, the idea is new, and it should be tested in many classrooms by many teachers. Present indications are that such experimentation will establish the value of sentence combining practice. The question of the place of the study of transformational-generative grammar as such has to some extent replaced a similar question about Latinate grammar as a curriculum bone of contention. Should it be for all students in a required course, or should it be elective fare?

The modern language curriculum gives attention to the use of language in all sorts of ways. Writing and speaking are there as they have always been; yet there is a renewed emphasis on having a special affinity for language be a part

of our lives daily. We have even coined a word to express this concept --- languaging --- and we say that pupils should engage in it often. Robert C. Small, Jr., in the April, 1976, English Journal, stated six principles for language activities of this kind. He sees such activities--ones that should be fun--as important for the development of language skill and interest. One of his twelve illustrations suggests that pupils "play" with names, both place and personal, as a fascinating, intriguing bit of languaging.[11]

In 1970, in writing about vocabulary for slow learners, Nancy Doemel let us see that languaging is not just for the ablest students any more! Among other examples, she reported how a feature article on automobiles provoked car-interested boys to discover where the names of some of them came from and why automobile companies choose such names as Charger, Cutlass, Cougar, Javelin, Pacer, and so on and on.[12]

Indeed, we now know that fascinating language matters like language change, dialects, and languaging of the kinds just mentioned can well replace the time given to useless attention to the formal study of grammar in the English curriculum except in elective courses and units and that it is doing so in many schools as the practices of the past succumb to those of the present and the future.

FOOTNOTES

1. Smith, Dora V. Instruction in English, Bulletin, 1932, No. 17., National Survey of Secondary Education, Monograph No. 20, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 35

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Petrosky, Anthony R. "Grammar Instruction: What We Know," English Journal, 66 (December, 1977) pp. 86-88.

6. Smith. op. cit., p. 36

7. Rivlin, H. N. Functional Grammar, Teachers College Contributions to Education, No. 435, (New York: Columbia University, 1930), p. 61

8. Smith, op. cit., p. 40

9. Salisbury, Rachel. "The Psychology of Composition," English Journal, 25 (May, 1936), p. 365.

10. O'Hare, Frank. Sentence Combining, (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English), 1973.

11. Small, Robert C. Jr. "Doing Things with Language," English Journal. 65 (April, 1976), pp.86-89.

12. Doemel, Nancy. "Vocabulary for Slow Learners," English Journal, 59 (January, 1970), pp.78-80.